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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: GOU INOCULATES INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS AGAINST
SOCIAL CRITICISM

11. (SBU) Summary: At least six independent journalists were informally summoned to the Prosecutor's Office on January 7 for interviews. The journalists who responded were questioned about their professional activities, their views of the regime, their connection to other independent journalists, and their connections to the U.S. Embassy. Thus far no charges appear to have been levied against the journalists. Several of the summoned journalists reported on their interviews in online articles the following day. The interviews took place at a time when several prominent state media organizations were undergoing personnel restructuring. End Summary.

Journalists Summoned to Prosecutor's Office

12. (SBU) At least six independent journalists were summoned to the Prosecutor's Office of Tashkent City on January 7, 2010 to undergo questioning related to their "journalism activity". The six journalists, all of whom are known by the Embassy's Public Affairs Section (PAS), are: Khusnitdin Kutbiddinov, a former RFE/RL correspondent and current freelancer; Abdumalik Boboev, a VOA correspondent; Marina Kozlova, a former AP stringer and current freelancer, Said Abdurahmanov (pen name Sid Yanyshhev), a freelancer primarily for ferghana.ru; Vasiliy Markov, a freelancer primarily for uznews.net and ferghana.ru; and Alexey Volosevich, a ferghana.ru correspondent. Boboev and Markov refused to heed the summons until officially notified in writing.

13. (SBU) Three of these journalists (Kozlova, Abdurahmanov, and Kutbiddinov) called PAS of their own volition to discuss the summons. PAS first learned of Yanyshhev and Volosevich's summons from Kutbiddinov who reported to have seen the other two journalists leaving the interview room as he was entering.

14. (SBU) According to PAS journalist contacts, the summons came about after the National Security Service (NSS) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) wrote to the Prosecutor's Office asking that certain journalists be interviewed. According to PAS contacts, the Prosecutor's Office contacted them on the morning of January 7th and asked that they take part in interviews later that day. In the initial phone calls, the journalists were told that the interviews would not be lengthy and that they would only include questions related to their journalism activities. PAS later learned that after their interviews, the journalists were asked to write and sign statements regarding their activities.

15. (SBU) PAS heard in detail from Kutbiddinov after his interview was completed. He told PAS that he was interviewed by Bahrom Nurmatov, the Assistant Prosecutor of Tashkent City. According to Kutbiddinov, Nurmatov was very familiar with all of Kutbiddinov's articles. He was asked why he was attempting to "blackmail" the GOU through his writing. He was also presented with a list of his latest financial transactions through Western Union and questioned about the source of the funds. Nurmatov also claimed to have evidence that Kutbiddinov had provided financial assistance to Dilmurod Sayyid (imprisoned human rights activist and independent

journalist). Kutbiddinov told PAS that he denied providing such assistance in his interview and in his written statement. Kutbiddinov was also shown the June 2008 documentary about RFE/RL reporters and was told that he was mentioned in the film and that it could be used against him. Kutbiddinov was released after being warned that he might be summoned again in the future.

Online Media Reports Describing the Interviews

¶6. (U) On January 8, nearly identical variations of two articles regarding the interviews appeared on the following websites: ferghana.ru, ozodlik.org (RFE/RL), bbc.co.uk/uzbek, harakat.net, turonzamin.org (all of which are blocked in Uzbekistan). The two original articles were written by Abdurahmanov and Kutbiddinov. Their articles named several but not all of the summoned journalists and described their experiences at the Prosecutor's Office. According to the article on ferghana.ru (by Abdurahmanov), the Prosecutor's Office had compiled detailed records on the journalists and their personal lives. The Prosecutor's Office characterized their articles as "tendentious" and one-sided.

Foreign Connections Questioned

¶7. (U) According to the online article by Abdurahmanov, the Prosecutor's Office questioned him regarding his attendance at international conferences. They also asked about his relationship to foreign embassies, and in particular to the U.S. Embassy. It is not known whether other reporters were similarly questioned.

TASHKENT 00000034 002 OF 002

(Comment: The journalists interviewed by the Prosecutor's Office are all regular participants in Embassy sponsored events. End comment.)

Summons as Part of Larger Pattern?

¶8. (SBU) The summons to the Prosecutor's Office came at a time when several state media organizations were undertaking personnel restructuring. On January 7, reports surfaced that two major newspaper editors had been fired: Abdurasul Jumakulov, the Editor-in-Chief of Hurriyat (Transparency), and Ahmadjon Meliboev, Editor of O'zbekiston Adabiyoti va San'ati (Literature and Culture of Uzbekistan). The reasons for their dismissals are unclear. Some reporters believe the timing suggests that the dismissals may be part of a larger movement to exert pressure on media outlets to conform to cautious and unwritten standards regarding "Uzbek values" and social commentary. However, at a Press Gap on December 28 (a PAS-hosted informal gathering), local journalists told PAS that media outlets are currently facing severe budget shortages. Evidence of these shortages can be seen in the current delay and withholding of part, if not all, of many journalists' salaries. The lay-offs could be related to such budget shortfalls.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) The interviews by the Prosecutor's Office did not appear to be specifically targeting the U.S. Embassy, but they are all an ominous reminder that dissent, or even mild disagreement with conventional wisdom, is not tolerated in Uzbek media. In the past, some journalists have been summoned to speak with authorities and afterwards faced no further legal actions. Such interviews are used by the GOU as a heavy-handed means of intimidating journalists and promoting self-censorship, a prophylaxis, as one journalist called it. However, in other cases, such interviews have been only the first of many, and in some cases have led to arrests and convictions. The recent actions of the Prosecutor's Office contradict statements by Karimov calling for less self-censorship. End Comment.

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